"You Learn How to Act": The Impact of Service with Elders on Student Learning

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Abstract

This paper describes a project in which faculty collaborated with two agencies to facilitate student learning about communication with elders. Data on student learning was collected via survey, focus groups, and reflective writing. Survey results showed that the five most important benefits students rated themselves as gaining from the service-learning experience were volunteering to help others, improving oral communication skills, helping others, developing new skills, and developing awareness of social problems. Themes derived from focus group interviews were "you learn how to act" and "a different dimension of a person." Analysis of data revealed that service-learning helps beginning nursing students improve oral communication skills with elders, develop sensitivity to aging issues, and make the transition to a clinical course focused on aging.

Introduction

Service-learning is a type of experiential learning that involves applying course concepts to a volunteer experience. In an analysis based on the principles of Dewey and other experiential learning theorists of the early twentieth century, Eyler and Giles *(1999)* describe service-learning as a cycle of action and reflection, not simply recounting what one has learned through reading and lecture. This involves specific service goals and writing and speaking assignments that facilitate the connection between classroom theory and reality-based experiences in the community. Ciaccio and Walker *(1998)* differentiate between experiential learning and service-learning. They contend that although practice in health care agencies provides experiential learning, this is not equivalent to service-learning, whose aim is to transform the community. When students face events that cause them to wrestle with their assumptions, learning is set into motion (Ciaccio and Walker 1998). Service-learning is unique in that "[it] exposes them to life as lived by their clients" *(Ciaccio and Walker 1998, 176)*.

Purpose

While service-learning is described as efficacious in many settings, little has been written of its impact on beginning nursing students working with community-dwelling elders. The purpose of this paper is to discuss what beginning nursing students learned through a service project with elders. Results of survey data will be explained. The themes that emerged from student writing and focus group interviews will be described and strategies that have effectively encouraged learning are identified.

Review of Literature

The research literature reveals that learning is enhanced when service-learning is integrated into a course. Here are some highlights: Hales *(1997)* describes integration of service-learning into a community health course in which students performed thirty hours of service. Students were able to apply theoretical models to practice, and question assumptions and stereotypes developed in hospital practice. They rated the development of communication skills more highly than in a similar course without service-learning. Using student surveys and focus groups, Peterson and Schaeffer *(1999)* found that service-learning contributed to the development of collaboration and research skills. Cohen and colleagues *(1998)* integrated service-learning into a second-semester junior-level course in which service was performed in refugee centers and other diverse community sites. They reported enhanced communication skills and appreciation of nursing roles in the community. Debasio *(2001)* used a faculty-managed health care center to engage students in community-based education and reported improved communication skill, increased level of critical reflection, and a more sensitive understanding of human issues.

Background

The setting for the present study was a private liberal arts college in central Virginia that offers baccalaureate and master's degrees. Service-learning with elders was integrated into two beginning-level nrsing courses. The first nursing course focused on an introduction to nursing concepts and theories, and standards of nursing practice. The second course included content related to geriatrics, with practice in a nursing home.

This project was initiated because faculty teaching in the second nursing course, Care of the Older Adult, were concerned that

student anxiety related to nurse-client communication at the outset of the course was impeding the progression of learning. Behaviors indicating anxiety included difficulty initiating conversations with elders and avoidance of doing so by congregating with peers. Prior to beginning this project with elders, students studied communication in the fall semester and did not have any contact with a client until the following spring semester in the geriatric-focused course. Students were taught communication concepts in the classroom setting using lecture, case studies, videos, and role play. Learning was evaluated via objective tests.

Students completed twelve service hours each semester in the agency where they were assigned. Six hours were included in the laboratory component of the course and six hours were completed independently. Learning was assessed via objective tests and short reflection papers addressing communication with elders. Specific opportunities for dialogue regarding these communication topics were provided during class time. Students also maintained communication with faculty members by keeping a journal. They concluded the first service-learning experience by writing a research paper about an aspect of communication with elders and one other area of interest.

In the second course students were expected to identify one or two specific goals for the experience such as leading a therapeutic group activity or providing an educational session for participants. Students completed three short reflection papers related to the service-learning experience on aspects of the relationship with an elder; they shared their ideas during three class sessions.

Objectives

The following course objectives were relevant for students in this project:

- Identify concepts and theories that are foundational to decision-making in nursing.
- Discuss communication techniques used in nurse-patient relationships across the lifespan.

Faculty goals included illustrating the concept of communication through classroom theory and service with elders. They were particularly interested in whether service-learning in the initial course decreased anxiety related to communication with elders and facilitated transition to the geriatric-focused course.

Faculty Roles

One faculty member provided classroom teaching and coordination for courses, including the classroom and laboratory components taught by two supporting faculty members. Orientation guidelines for the service-learning were provided by the coordinator. Each faculty member supervised a group of fourteen to fifteen students and worked with one of the agencies and its staff. Faculty supervising the service-learning experiences met regularly with the course coordinator to discuss issues related to student objectives and agency relationships.

Agencies

The partnering agencies were an adult day care center and a high-rise senior living community that incorporated both assisted living and independent living for senior citizens. Both agencies included structured therapeutic recreational activities for seniors and published a preplanned calendar of activities and events. At the start of the project, mutual goals, learning objectives, and expectations for students were discussed with the faculty team, including the course coordinator and supporting faculty. Faculty and agency staff held bimonthly luncheon meetings to exchange ideas about student progress and activities that would benefit clients and to clarify staff, student, and faculty roles. At the end of each semester, faculty coordinated evaluation sessions that also included preplanning for the next semester.

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Preparation for Service-Learning

Aside from reading and lecture content on communication theory, students learned about communication via video and role play. Students also attended an orientation session with the staff at the two service-learning sites. In these sessions, staff discussed communication strategies that are beneficial to elders. One staff member came to a class session and presented relevant communication strategies for the elderly population and discussed the therapeutic nature of structured activity groups.

Methods

This was a qualitative study, but both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to understand the impact of service-learning on nursing students at the beginning of the first course and at the conclusion of the second course. Before the service-learning experience students were administered a forty-five item "Learning in Community Settings Service Learning Inventory" survey developed by Astin, Sax, and colleagues *(1991)*. This survey has been used extensively in large-scale longitudinal studies and other studies that assess the impact of service-learning in college students *(Astin, Vogelgesang, et al. 2000; Sax and Astin 1998)*. In this tool students are asked to rate the importance of service-learning using a Likert scale. This tool evaluates the impact of service related to eleven dependent measures, including academic outcomes, values, self-efficacy, leadership, career plans, and plans to participate in further service.

Van Manen's *(1990)* phenomenologic process was used to interpret the findings. Phenomenological inquiry highlights the world of lived experience as the object of research. This approach involves investigating an experience as it is lived and reflecting and writing about the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon *(van Manen 1990)*. In order to understand the meaning of the service-learning experience for students, focus group interview transcripts, students' reflective writing, and faculty field notes constituted the research text. (In phenomenologic inquiry, data are called "text." Field notes document what researchers saw, felt, heard, thought, or experienced while participating in aspects of the research *(van Manen 1990; Streubert and Carpenter 1999)*. Therefore, faculty kept field notes of their student observations in the focus group interviews and in the nursing home and service-learning settings.

Focus groups consisting of six to ten students were organized at the end of each course. The course coordinator was the moderator, and another course faculty member was the co-moderator. Twenty-seven of twenty-nine students elected to participate. Key questions were chosen to stimulate focus group discussion:

- How has the service learning experience been for you?
- How did the service learning experience affect you?
- Has the service affected your learning in the course?

The focus group responses were taped and transcribed. Reflective writing completed in the geriatric-focused course was analyzed. Each student completed two narratives and one poem. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

- ❑ What is it like to communicate with elders?
- ❑ What is it like to experience aging?
- ❑ What is it like to end a relationship with an elder?

Eighty papers and poems were analyzed using the same procedures as used for analysis of the transcripts.

In accord with van Manen's *(1990)* recommendation that research methods be chosen with a mindfulness to context and the unique question that is studied, analysis was undertaken by reviewing the transcripts and student writing as a whole to get a sense of large core ideas, then reviewing them again paragraph by paragraph. This methodology as followed in the spirit of van Manen's suggestion that human science research should not be mechanical. The researcher attempts to analyze the text to gain insight and find deeper meaning based on what the researcher knows about the context of the research and other sources of text. Themes are defined as the structures that make up that experience *(van Manen 1990)*.

It is recommended that themes be validated both by participants and another observer *(van Manen 1990; Krueger 1994)*. Faculty discussed themes that emerged from focus group interviews with the co-moderator and one other faculty member who did not participate in the focus group. Representative students from each group verified that these independent conclusions were accurate representations of their responses and captured the essence of their experience. The purpose of this validation was to explore more deeply the meaning of the phenomenon and to prevent the researcher from jumping to inaccurate conclusions *(van Manen 1990; Krueger 1994)*. Streubert and Carpenter *(1999)* warn that one danger in the use of focus groups is that a "group think" can dominate the session. Therefore, in this study, use of individual narrative writing as another source of text offsets this possibility.

Results

Twenty-nine students—twenty-eight females and one male—participated in the study. The age range was 19 to 25 years with the average age 20 years old. The group was predominantly

white (84%), 12 percent being African American, and 4 percent Hispanic or Asian.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 11. The most important benefits of service-learning identified through the survey were: (1) volunteering to help others; (2) improving oral communication skills; (3) helping others; (4) developing new skills; and (5) developing an awareness of social problems. The factors that students rated as least important were: (1) ability to work cooperatively with others; (2) feeling personal satisfaction; (3) developing a personal value system; (4) finding a career helpful to others; and (5) developing interpersonal skills. Pretest scores for all items were high. For example, students' mean score for the value of "helping others" was 4.24 out of a possible 5. In addition, 64 percent of students had done some type of volunteer work previously. Posttest mean scores at the conclusion of the year are listed in Table 1. Due to the high initial ratings and ceiling effect, significant differences were rare. One item, "volunteering to help others," was rated significantly higher at posttest.

The focus group interviews revealed two major themes. These were: "You learn how to act" and "a different dimension of a person." These emerged through analysis of the written transcripts of taped interviews. Faculty chose to use students' own words to name themes because these seemed to most accurately portray the essence of the students' responses. Table 2 illustrates these themes with selected student quotes.

In addition to the themes that emerged from the focus groups, six predominant themes surfaced from student writing. These were: "loss is a part of aging," "which one of these women is going to be me?," "a special way to communicate," "you get a lot back," "a nurse restores hope," and "saying goodbye." These are listed in Table 3 with selected quotes from student writing.

Faculty perspectives: Faculty supervising the clinical experiences confirmed that the themes identified in focus groups were consistent with their observations in the clinical setting. They believed that students had a smoother transition to the second course than they had observed previously. Students demonstrated this by readily entering into relationships with elders and showing a relaxed attitude at the clinical site. In the agency setting, staff indicated that many students demonstrated independence in initiating opportunities for communication or assistance with elders in the nursing home.

Table 1: Scores on variables of "Learning in Community Settings Service Learning Inventory"

| Mean responses to variables | | | |
| How important is SL personally?   5 = most important   1 = least important | | | |
CATEGORY	PRETEST	POSTTEST	CHANGE
IMPORTANT PERSONALLY			
Helping others	4.24	4.38	↑ .14
Develop value system	4.24	4.15	↓ .9
Finding career helpful to others	4.28	4.20	↓ .8
Volunteering to help others	3.44	4.04*	↑ .6
IMPORTANT RELATED TO COMMUNITY SERVICE			
To help others	4.28	4.38	↑ .10
To develop new skills	4.12	4.35	↑ .23
Feel personal satisfaction	4.12	4.04	↓ .08
Enhance academic learning	4.08	4.19	↑ .11
Work with people different from me	3.84*	4.0*	↑ .16
RATING SELF COMPARED TO AVERAGE PERSON OF SAME AGE			
Interpersonal skills	4.0	4.0	No change
Ability to work cooperatively	4.32	4.08	↓ .16

* = Paired sample t-test: $P < 0.5$ (0.016).

Use of both writing assignments and discussion in the classroom setting allowed for a good balance in student-teacher communication. Students initiated discussion of issues related to service-learning, and faculty responded in a nonjudgmental way and often made adjustments in the experience based on student comments. This seemed to empower the students and had a motivating effect. Students who were less likely to open up in focus groups were quite vivid in their journal entries or reflection papers. Such writing also allowed for more representative findings and evaluation of the experience, since the students most comfortable with discussions were not always of the majority opinion related to the experience.

Some students did not enjoy service-learning. Most such students had significant personal responsibilities outside school. However, the majority of nursing students were highly motivated

**Table 2: Themes related to service with elders from the
focus group interview**

Focus group themes	Representative student quotes
"You Learn How to Act"	"I think it was beneficial because it helped us learn how to act with the elderly in the clinicals."
	"I think if we were to go right into the nursing home I would have been just taken aback, like . . . you're worried about the medical part, taking care of them . . . at the retirement home, you have a healthy person to hang out with and see what the average older person is like and then apply that to someone who has something wrong with them and then it's just not like all at once, it helps to ease the pain . . ."
	"I think we could probably apply our communication [in the clinical]. We understood how to communicate with the elderly and the issues they're facing and being aware that we could adjust our communication to meet their needs . . ."
"A Different Dimension of a Person"	"It's a different dimension of a person when you're in a community than when you're in an acute care setting or a nursing home setting. It's a little bit different because you are in the community."
	"I like seeing that all elderly persons aren't all in nursing homes and can't get around . . ."
	"You never know when they are schizophrenic or Alzheimer's'. There was one guy, they said don't approach him, he would get kind of jittery sometimes. . . . But he was one of my favorite there."

to work with elders and considered it a benefit of the course. This conclusion is validated by very high initial scores on the Astin and colleagues *(1991)* survey in those areas relating to volunteering, communication skills, and helping others.

Discussion

This study makes a contribution to the literature by identifying some positive changes that have occurred in beginning nursing students after the completion of twelve hours of service-learning with elders. Conceptually, these findings signify forward movement in understanding the experience of beginning nursing students. Thus far nursing literature on service-learning has dealt with students at the upper-division levels. Improvement in communication skills and awareness of stereotypes and social issues are themes presented in the literature related to these students. An important additional finding of this study is that service-learning for beginning students decreases anxiety and facilitates transition to a clinical site such as a nursing home.

Although survey data is included in the study, and provides another lens with which to view the student experience, this is primarily a qualitative study. The results of qualitative research are transferable but not generalizable to large groups. This implies that the study findings have meaning to others in similar situations *(Streubert and Carpenter 1999)*. This study has meaning for faculty involved in teaching communication. Potential areas of applicability include professional schools such as social work, business, education, counseling, medicine, law, dentistry, radiology, physical therapy, and speech therapy. Students in these fields must combine knowledge of communication with technical skill in order to perform effectively.

One area in which beginning students did not show growth was collaboration. Student ratings on "the ability to work cooperatively" dropped in the posttest, as shown in Table 1. Faculty observed that students were reluctant to discuss conflicts with agency staff and brought problem issues to faculty instead. A possible explanation is that limited agency resources restricted time available for staff to talk with students.

Faculty indicated, validated that students seemed more relaxed and independent than the students they had observed in the years before the project began. This supported the first focus group theme, "you learn how to act," in Table 2. As the student quote under "you learn how to act" indicates, without the communication experience that service-learning afforded, it was probably difficult for students to grasp communication techniques with elders while also learning to give physical care for the first time. When giving physical care students face issues related to personal intimacy and sexuality that they have never

**Table 3: Themes related to service with elders from
student reflective writing**

Theme	Representative student quotes
Loss Is a Part of Aging	"Anger may be expressed as an adult ages because they are beginning to realize what is happening to them. They [elders] become angry because their life is gradually being taken away from them. He or she must be reassured that they have lived a full satisfying life to the best of their ability and note the accomplishments made."
Which One of These Women Is Going to Be Me?	"I gained more patience with the elderly because I realize that I am going to be in their shoes one day and I am going to be just like them, wanting to talk to the young . . ." "I found myself wondering, 'Which one of these women is going to be me?'"
A Special Way To Communicate	"Sometimes it's hard to understand older people when they talk. I just politely ask them to repeat what they said. I have to speak louder because a lot of people have hearing problems. Older people like to talk and they love it even more when someone is there to listen . . . they love to reminisce."
You Get a Lot Back	Student poem: "Even if you [elder] don't remember me I will remember you. You were my teacher every Monday morning. You taught me what it was like to care for a person like you. Through you I saw what was wrong and what was right."
A Nurse Restores Hope	" . . . We had a very good conversation about how proud she was of her two daughters, her face lit up as she was talking about how they went to college and made something of themselves. She was also talking very highly of herself about how she pulled herself together in spite of a terrible childhood."
Goodbye	" . . . Ending a relationship means saying good-bye to their outer-selves and taking a bit of their inner-selves with you . . ."

experienced before. Most nurses would agree that quite a bit of experience is required before such tasks can be performed comfortably. Prior to the nursing home experience students had only practiced bathing with peers.

Students demonstrated in their behaviors at the clinical site and in reflective writing that they had developed sensitivity to issues of aging and had reconsidered personal values. Findings from this research concur with those of Ciaccio and Walker *(1998)*, who contend that service-learning exposes students to life as lived by their clients and thus raises new questions of personal meaning-making that broaden the boundaries of learning. Themes derived from reflective writing indicated that students changed because of this service-learning experience through gaining insight related to their personal values. They recognized aspects of aging such as the experience of multiple losses. Faculty observed that students applied communication theory in addressing these issues with elders. The theme "a special way to communicate" in Table 3, demonstrates that students were able to internalize theory on communication. In the theme "a different dimension of a person" in Table 2, students indicate that they were able to view elders as individuals, abandoning stereotypes and labels associated with diagnoses. Faculty noted that this same issue regarding the need to abandon stereotypes was apparent in student research papers.

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Survey scores revealed that an important benefit for students was developing an awareness of social problems. Many had never worked with elders and did not understand the particular financial burdens faced by them and their caregivers. Students witnessed losses experienced by elders such as losing their homes due to deteriorating physical or cognitive function. The students verbalized a sense of personal loss of an elder friend upon transfer or death. This became an important issue for faculty-student communication via journals.

This project has been successful but also time-consuming for faculty. Faculty estimated that it required an additional two to

four hours per week to communicate with agencies and to grade assignments related to the service-learning experience. In order to evaluate the project adequately and get a view of the lived experience of students, logs or reflective writing is required. At the outset, relationships were a priority, including weekly communication with agencies. This might mean contributing another few hours a month in order to capture the culture of the agency and prepare the students for the experience. Faculty in this study spent the extra time required for service-learning, and this most definitely contributed to the quality of the experience for students. However, they often found themselves stretched by other responsibilities, such as the need to give students a strong foundation in basic skills, time constraints caused by faculty turnover, and the challenge of producing research and publication. Unless otherwise rewarded, faculty are most likely to find teaching strategies that conserve time for scholarship. In an era characterized by fiscal restraint and resource shortages in higher education, faculty must carefully prioritize. Faculty who have an interest in social justice issues are most likely to undertake a project such as this. Another incentive for faculty to do service-learning is working in an academic environment that commits to community service by rewarding it with tenure and promotion.

Conclusion

The combination of quantitative data in the form of survey responses and qualitative data in the forms of focus groups and student writing clarified the meaning of student responses. Faculty were much better able to assess the impact of the service-learning by viewing it from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. For future studies, some of the questions posed by data collected via survey could be clarified further in focus group interviews; survey analysis should be completed well before the focus groups are initiated.

In future studies a longitudinal design is recommended using similar methodology. In addition, implementing a repeated measures design could allow for identifying change with individual students. Duplication of this study in a variety of nursing programs with adaptable curriculum would show trends over time and perhaps differences in student responses based on student characteristics and the nursing program's culture. This study could also be undertaken with students in professional schools who may have similar course objectives related to communication.

Since students' extracurricular lives affect learning, adding more demographic data to assess such elements would be helpful.

Faculty in this study faced the tension of "delivering content" versus teaching and affirming theory through service-learning. Many faculty members might disagree that service-learning is a useful strategy and would prefer to place effort in classroom activities. Tensions regarding these differing perspectives exist in the academic setting, and faculty interested in doing service-learning must negotiate with faculty teams to show that including a service component in a course strengthens academic learning. Providing research data on the impact of service-learning is paramount. Further study on the factors influencing nursing faculty participation in service-learning would be useful.

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